

Heart Patients and UPMC Surgeon Recently Perform in Bodiography Ballet

By Christopher Cussat

On Saturday, June 4, 2011 at the Byham Theater in Downtown Pittsburgh, heart transplant surgery and contemporary ballet commingled in a dance performance of Bodiography: Heart (Function vs. Emotion). This artistic work was inspired by and dedicated to patients with pulmonary hypertension and advanced heart disease. The performance showcased and included professional dancers as well as heart surgery patients and physicians.

While developing this original ballet, Bodiography Artistic Director and Choreographer, Maria Caruso, shadowed physicians and surgeons of the Advanced Heart Failure Program at UPMC as they cared for patients undergoing heart and lung transplantation. "I was inspired to create this performance after talking with patients who suffered from pulmonary arterial hypertension (PAH) and women with peripartum cardiomyopathy (PPCM). I hope the ballet raises awareness of these conditions," she explains.

Her interaction with patient support groups for subjects with PAH and women with PPCM also facilitated and assisted in shaping this monumental presentation. Caruso notes that her intimate meetings with individual patients and masterful surgeons allowed her to gain insight into their struggles and victories over advanced heart and lung disease—and then in turn help her to utilize ballet as an artistic medium to raise awareness.

An almost unlikely, rookie performer, Robert Kormos, M.D., Director of the UPMC Artificial Heart Program and Co-Director of the UPMC Heart Transplantation Program, made his theatrical debut among those others participating in the ballet.

He recalls the first time Caruso approached him about the performance. "I met her and we had invited her to the hospital to watch a couple of operations because her goal was to incorporate some of the movements that she saw in the operating room into the themes that the dancers were going to portray." He adds that Bodiography: Heart (Function vs. Emotion) was really trying to portray the struggles of patients as they wait for organs, go through their transplants, and recover—all the things that they experience from both physical and emotional perspectives. "She was trying to translate that into colors, motions, and actions by the dancers—



so she asked me if I would play a small role in the second act," Kormos notes.

Although he was uncertain about doing it at first, after learning more about the themes and intent of the ballet, Kormos became intrigued and agreed to perform. Fittingly, Kormos' role in the ballet is one of a surgeon performing a heart transplant. He explains, "At one point, a dancer comes out portraying the old, diseased heart and I'm pretending to cut out the old heart and then I lead it off the stage. I then bring in the dancer portraying the new heart and go through some exaggerated motions of sewing it in while the new heart dances on the stage—so it portrays the reality of what was happening at this point in patients' lives as they receive their transplants."



Kormos admits that his participation was a very personal and emotional experience. "It was a very unique experience to be on stage with your patients and watch some of these creative folks show an incredible expression of their vitality and life after having been so close to death. Some have had heart failure for so many years—so to be able to see them 'blossom' on stage is a real benefit to any physician because we can physically see the outcome of what we do." Kormos does not hesitate to add a heartfelt pun. "So for me it was just very heart warming—not to be hackneyed in a phrase, but it truly was a very emotional experience to see these people up there in front of an audience and express their vitality!"

The performance was a great success according to Kormos because of the tremendous positive feedback received from the patients and medical people who attended the ballet. "We really did get the sense that a lot of people were touched by it—and I think many patients, in some respect, relived their experiences while watching the performance. Although some of them may not want to necessarily do that, I believe it is a way of coming to grips with what happened to them—so I think a lot of patients enjoyed it."

After being a part of Bodiography: Heart (Function vs. Emotion), Kormos feels that he now has an even greater appreciation of the performing arts. "The amount of energy and effort that goes into a production like this would never have registered with me unless I had seen it first hand." He even compares the ballet to surgery itself. "Watching her [Caruso] essentially conduct people is amazing—I mean it's not that different from what we do in the operating room. We also have a team that we have to work with and make sure that everything is going smoothly—and we're also conducting highly talented individuals to get a job done. So for me, I came to appreciate the arts in a way that I never would have—especially if I had not had the opportunity to be a part of this."

Proceeds from this event benefited Family House's Family Assistance Fund. This fund helps support patients who cannot afford to stay in Family House, but who really need a place where they can stay while their family members are recovering from or undergoing transplants and other surgeries. For more information on Bodiography please visit www.bodiographybc.com. †

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